

# Reassessing Cambodia's Patronage System(s) and the End of Competitive Authoritarianism: Electoral Clientelism in the Shadow of Coercion

Neil Loughlin

## ABSTRACT

The dominant literature on Cambodian politics over the past two decades suggested that a mixture of elite and mass clientelism had enabled the hegemonic Cambodian People's Party (CPP) to rule via competitive but authoritarian elections, while lessening its previous reliance on repression and violence. Such explanations did not predict the upswing in contestation in the country in 2013 and thereafter. Neither do they account for the crackdown that followed. Following literature that draws attention to the tensions in building and maintaining political coalitions under authoritarianism, and demonstrating the difficulties in maintaining competitive authoritarianism over time, this article draws attention to structural, institutional, and distributional impediments to the CPP leadership in building and maintaining effective reciprocal relations with electoral clients while simultaneously balancing the interests of the military and other elites at the core of the regime. To make its argument, the article compares weaknesses in the CPP's electoral clientelism with the effectiveness of patronage within the security forces, seen through the lens of Cambodia's experience of land dispossession. It shows that an extractive and exclusive political economy privileged the interests of regime insiders over potential mass electoral clients precisely during the same period the CPP was supposed to be securing its hold on power via mass electoral clientelism. This further explains why the regime fell back on repression over reform in response to the upswing in contestation manifest from 2013, and why, despite the failings of its mass patronage project, repression has nevertheless been successful as a strategy for regime survival during a period of heightened popular contestation.

**Keywords:** Cambodia, clientelism, patronage, competitive authoritarianism, political parties, Cambodian People's Party, Hun Sen, coercion, land grab

**DOI:** 10.5509/2020933497

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NEIL LOUGHLIN is postdoctoral researcher at KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies. His research focuses on political economies of authoritarian regimes. He has worked as a researcher at various local and international human rights and environmental rights organizations since 2010. Email: loughlin@kitlv.nl

## Introduction

On July 27, 2013, despite widespread irregularities and an electoral landscape heavily in its favour, the incumbent Cambodian People's Party (CPP)<sup>1</sup> nearly lost the highly contested national election. This was the fifth since electoral competition was reintroduced by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1993. The CPP claimed 49 percent of the votes compared to 44 percent for the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), a united opposition which had formed from the merger of the Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party (HRP) in 2012. The result in 2013 came as a surprise to many observers of Cambodian politics, and to the CPP itself.<sup>2</sup>

The resurgence of an opposition able to challenge the CPP during the national election in 2013 and capable of mobilizing people on the street in its aftermath, then significantly growing its vote in rural areas in commune elections in 2017, demonstrated the limits of the dominant explanations of Cambodia's politics. These put a premium on electoral clientelism for regime durability and claimed that the CPP had turned away from relying on fear and repression as it had done between 1993 and 1998,<sup>3</sup> to a system of rule based on mass patronage politics delivering stable competitive electoral authoritarianism.

This article contends that the success of mass-party patronage and electoral clientelism delivering competitive election victories has been overemphasized in the literature on Cambodia.<sup>4</sup> It presents a new analysis of challenges to building and sustaining competitive authoritarianism and suggests renewed attention should be paid to the coercion underpinning CPP political dominance throughout this period. In doing so, it contributes to emerging literature identifying the difficulties of sustaining competitive authoritarianism over time,<sup>5</sup> and to our understanding of the relationship between elite and

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Acknowledgement: The author would like to thank Michael Buehler, Steve Heder, and Benjamin Lawrence for comments on earlier versions on this draft, and the editor and anonymous reviewers at *Pacific Affairs* whose comments strengthened the arguments presented in this article. The author acknowledges support from the Sydney South East Asia Centre (SSEAC) Visiting PhD Fellowship.

<sup>1</sup> Electoral Reform Alliance, Joint Report on the Conduct of the 2013 Election, (Phnom Penh: 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Hughes, "Understanding the Elections in Cambodia 2013," *Aglos: Journal of Area-Based Global Studies* (2015): 1–20.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Heder and Judy Ledgerwood, *Politics, Propaganda and Violence in Cambodia During the UNTAC Era* (Boston: M.E. Sharpe, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Kheang Un, "Cambodia: Moving Away from Democracy?" *International Political Science Review* 32, no. 5 (2011): 546–562;

Sebastian Strangio, *Hun Sen's Cambodia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014); Lee Morgenbesser, *Behind the Facade: Elections Under Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Christopher Carothers, "The Surprising Instability of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (2018): 129–135.

mass patronage and coercion in systems of electoral authoritarianism, via a close exploration of its manifestations and conflicts in Cambodia.

This article highlights the underlying and persistent tensions in Cambodia's clientelist politics and patronage relations since elections were reintroduced in 1993. In so doing, it also shows the difficulties the CPP experienced in building and sustaining a mass-based party able to command popular support.

Scholarship has shown that broad-based and highly institutionalized parties capable of winning commanding electoral majorities arise only under very specific conditions and historical circumstances.<sup>6</sup> This article reconceptualizes the CPP to emphasize the particular obstacles—structural, institutional, and distributional—to building a mass-based clientelist party. It presents a critical re-examination of the CPP's history and its development of elite and military patronage systems from the 1980s and 1990s, and into the 2000s: the supposed zenith of the party's electoral clientelism. The analysis instead points to a coercive core working in often contradictory ways to building genuine voter-clients over the same period. This approach emphasizes the CPP's lack of foundations as a socially embedded, legitimate organization capable of delivering mass patronage to secure reliable electoral clientelism,<sup>7</sup> particularly as compared to “paradigmatic” cases of dominant parties delivering electoral hegemony under competitive electoral authoritarianism, such as Malaysia.<sup>8</sup>

The CPP's weak social embedding contrasts with its strong organizational capacity, channelling state power in the form of coercion and facilitating the extraction of resources to its core members, particularly in the security forces. Repetitive elections did not institutionalize mass patronage networks capable of delivering more convincing competitive authoritarian elections over time.<sup>9</sup> Rather, they served to further entrench and embed a coercive core within the regime, ill-organized to build genuine reciprocity, but which has become increasingly cohesive and proficient enough to manage the threats from below to the party and the networks of economic interests that have cemented its position in power.

To make its case, this article presents a critical examination of the politics of land dispossession in Cambodia. This relates to the appropriation by the state of large tracts of land previously occupied by farmers and urban dwellers leased to private business interests over the past three decades. This practice

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<sup>6</sup> Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> William Case, “Electoral Authoritarianism in Malaysia: Trajectory Shift,” *The Pacific Review* 22, no. 3, (2009): 311.

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of institutionalisation of competitive electoral authoritarianism see: Michael Bernhard, Amanda E. Edgell, and Staffan I. Lindberg, “Institutionalising Electoral Uncertainty and Authoritarian Regime Survival,” *European Journal of Political Research* 59, no. 2 (2019): 19.

has been shown to be vital to the way in which the CPP strengthened its grip on Cambodia via the entrenchment of party-military-business alliances in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>10</sup> More recently, it has been suggested that the profits from predatory economic practices were used to boost the CPP electorally in the 2000s. What now seems to be the more enduring legacy is that the land dispossession that went hand in glove with the building of elite political alliances has also been key to its popular undoing electorally. Unlike in some countries where the military controls significant business interests on their own terms,<sup>11</sup> what has emerged in Cambodia is a remarkably stable alliance between state officials, military enforcers, and civilian capitalist entrepreneurs for the mutual exploitation of Cambodia's resources. This now forms the basis of the country's crony capitalist economic system.

This article draws on fieldwork carried out between January and October 2017, supplemented by additional research trips from July to September 2018 and in November and December 2018. It is based on more than 50 semi-structured interviews conducted over this period, including 15 respondents directly cited in this article.<sup>12</sup> People were interviewed for their expertise in the subject matter through their work or lived experience. Interviewees ranged in age from university students to retired former diplomats and were drawn from a variety of socio-economic groups and backgrounds, including farmers, civil servants, high-ranking military officials, and economic tycoons. Interviews were conducted in Phnom Penh, Battambang, Siem Reap, and Preah Vihear. In addition to interviews, the article relies on reports released by the Cambodian government and its press units, and those of think tanks, international governmental organizations, civil society, and other sources including online and print media.

This article is structured as follows. The first section revisits existing explanations for CPP political survival in light of the 2013 election. It then reconsiders the architecture of the CPP in the context of its history as a repressive state apparatus imposed from above and with limited social embedding. It moves on to present evidence of its electoral illegitimacy before 2013 and after. In the second section, the focus on land shows that this organization has privileged the rapacious rewarding of its officials in the state and its military, which was its *modus operandi* from the 1980s and remains the case today. The paper concludes that this predation provides an important window into understanding Cambodia's current authoritarian path.

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<sup>10</sup> Caroline Hughes, *The Political Economy of Cambodia's Transition, 1991–2001* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Marcus Mietzner and Lisa Misol, "Military Businesses in Post-Suharto Indonesia: Decline, Reform and Persistence," in *The Politics of Military Reform*, eds. Jürgen Rüland, Maria-Gabriela Manea, Hans Born (Berlin: Springer, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> All interviews were carried out in accordance with SOAS' Research Ethics Policy available at: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/research/ethics/file143594.pdf>.

### **Existing Explanations of Cambodia's Politics**

Scholarship on Cambodia emphasizing elite patronage and electoral clientelism has been broadly captured under the banner of neopatrimonialism. Patronage is generally used to refer to both the exclusive allocation of resources to elite clients through often predatory practices such as land grabbing, analyzed in the second half of this article, and rewards and resources given to the general public in exchange for support of a political party at election time.<sup>13</sup> This second stream follows Hicken's definition of clientelism, a combination of particularistic targeting and contingency-based reciprocal exchange through which the "chief criterion for receiving the targeted benefit is political support, typically voting."<sup>14</sup> Elite predation and clientelist distribution were seen as successfully complimentary strategies for CPP's political survival. Conversely, this article emphasizes the tensions inherent in such a system under competitive authoritarianism.

Electoral patronage has been presented as both a modern phenomenon, and as reinforcing "traditional" rule in the modern context in analyses of Cambodia's politics. In these latter accounts, patron-clientelism is presented as a proxy for neo-traditionalism. As a leading proponent of this view, Morgenbesser presents modern-day Cambodian politics as a continuation of the pre-colonial Southeast Asian state, in which power was personalized and society organized vertically from the king, through the nobility, downwards to the peasantry. Nowadays, "the division of power remains largely unchanged," even if the actors populating its upper and middle levels are different.<sup>15</sup> Elections become a means of reinforcing supposed historical roots of political power, and modern incarnations of traditional redistributive mechanisms tying clients to their patrons in seeming perpetuity.<sup>16</sup>

Various studies have shown the limits to overly culturalist and selectively historicized accounts of patron-clientelism, including as applied to Cambodia. Early on, Scott warned of making easy distinctions between "parochial" and European models of political authority by over-distinguishing between Asian and European practices of securing political office and favours prior to the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Heder's work on the 2003 election showed how modern elections in Cambodia have very little in common with classic depictions of Southeast Asian political values as conceptualized by classic

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<sup>13</sup> See for example: Kheang Un and Sokbunthoeun So, "Land Rights in Cambodia: How Neopatrimonial Politics Restricts Land Policy Reform," *Pacific Affairs* 84, no. 2 (2011): 289–308.

<sup>14</sup> Allen Hicken "Clientelism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 14, no. 1 (2007): 294.

<sup>15</sup> Lee Morgenbesser, *Behind the Facade: Elections Under Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016): 51.

<sup>16</sup> Lee Morgenbesser, "The Failure of Democratization by Elections in Cambodia," *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 2 (2017): 135–155.

<sup>17</sup> James C. Scott, "The Analysis of Corruption in Developing Nations," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 11, no.3 (1969): 315–341.

scholars of the pre-colonial region.<sup>18</sup> More critically for the case at hand is that Morgenbesser is essentializing Cambodian politics as a constant, which cannot explain the variance in political outcomes under investigation here. This is elsewhere implicitly identified by Morgenbesser himself in his analysis of Myanmar's changing politics over time, when he removes historic patterns of patrimonialism as an independent variable in explaining its authoritarian political trajectory. He suggests "the onset of military rule created a schism" with Myanmar's patrimonial tradition.<sup>19</sup> Yet this is puzzlingly absent in his analysis of Cambodia in spite of the purposeful and near total destruction of existing political institutions during the Khmer Rouge period.

Un's work has been the most influential of the modern patronage-based accounts of Cambodian politics, and it is widely cited, including by Morgenbesser. His focus on the CPP as an elite and mass patronage broker comports with comparative work that places emphasis on the function of political parties in authoritarian systems. In these accounts, parties play a dual function: they manage elite competition, and secure some measure of consent to be ruled from the masses.<sup>20</sup> They are especially important in competitive authoritarian regimes because the incumbent retains power through elections.<sup>21</sup>

In Un's view, the CPP has effectively combined electoral clientelism and elite patronage for delivering CPP electoral hegemony, situating both in a broader context of performance legitimacy achieved via high GDP growth rates, and contributing to relative political stability under the CPP since the 2000s. He describes a system in which wealth accumulated by economic elites is instrumentalized by the CPP to carry out development projects to secure its electoral dominance: "Hun Sen/CPP have transformed patron-client ties by linking state/party elites to economic elites and then to voters to bolster their electoral victories and legitimacy and thus further strengthen their control of the country."<sup>22</sup>

However, the election in 2013 showed that the CPP's mass patronage had not bought it the electoral clients it thought it had, with voters rejecting the terms of the offered clientelist deal and ongoing recognition of their place in it.<sup>23</sup> Norén-Nilsson's study into electoral clientelism in 2013 showed that while Cambodian voters were happy to take patronage and other gifts from the CPP, they did not reciprocate with votes, and instead were more likely to question the legitimacy of the giver based on perceptions of inequality

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<sup>18</sup> Steve Heder, "Political Theatre in the 2003 Cambodian Elections: State Democracy and Conciliation in Historical Perspective," in *Staging Politics: Power and Performance in Asia and Africa*, eds. Julia Strauss and Donal O'Brien (London: I.P. Taurus, 2007), 51–172.

<sup>19</sup> Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade*, 133.

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Okar, "Elections Under Authoritarianism" *The Annual Review of Political Science* 12, no. 1 (2009): 403–422.

<sup>21</sup> Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 63.

<sup>22</sup> Un, "Cambodia," 548.

<sup>23</sup> Allen Hicken "Clientelism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 14, no. 1 (2007): 289–310.

and dissatisfaction with the political status quo.<sup>24</sup> Contrary to what has been previously suggested in the dominant literatures on Cambodian politics, the CPP was not the effective patronage distributor bringing in a steady stream of electoral clients.

A fuller explanation of Cambodia's politics that attends to the electoral threat in 2013, and the CPP's abandonment of competition altogether in 2018, can be found by reconsidering the tensions in the CPP's mass and elite patronage systems, and what this reveals more broadly about the CPP and the loci of political power in Cambodia. This pays attention to the fundamental dilemmas facing authoritarian leaders in managing their political constituencies and the implications under competitive authoritarianism. Svoblik's work is important in this regard, as he suggests that dictators can never be sure of their position and must constantly strive to maintain their security.<sup>25</sup> He shows that two fundamental imperatives shape the political calculations of leaders under authoritarianism: protecting oneself against threats from below, and the need to placate elite allies within the ruling coalition. This dictates how patronage is allocated within the regime, the use of repression, and ultimately the survival of the leader.

This article applies Svoblik's insight in relation to Cambodia's election in 2013 and subsequent abandonment of competitive authoritarianism. The following argument points to a new analysis of the CPP as an institution, historically and presently organized for the purpose of suppressing dissent and rewarding its elite supporters, rather than coopting an electorate from below that has traditionally been ambivalent to the party's legitimacy and that, unlike the military, has never been fundamental to its survival.

### **Organizational Impediments to Mass Party-Building and the CPP's Repressive Core**

Political parties under competitive electoral authoritarianism are most successful in obtaining consent from the masses when they have a legitimate basis in society. In Malaysia, which until recently provided an exemplary case of dominant party hegemony under competitive electoral authoritarianism, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) was extraordinarily successful in winning elections because it institutionalized as a broad-based party in a cross-class coalition.<sup>26</sup> In such cases of "strongly institutionalized" parties, they reach "deeply into society and nest within dense networks of both intra-party and external organisations."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Astrid Norén-Nilsson, "Good Gifts, Bad Gifts, and Rights: Cambodian Popular Perceptions and the 2013 Elections," *Pacific Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2016): 795–815.

<sup>25</sup> Milan W. Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Slater, *Ordering Power*.

<sup>27</sup> Meredith L. Weiss, "Coalitions and Competition in Malaysia – Incremental Transformation of a Strong-party System," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2013): 19.

In contrast, the CPP was formed under Vietnamese protection in 1979. It was to be the core political organization inside the administration and armed forces of the newly founded People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Its role was to administer Cambodia during its occupation in the 1980s, and to be the electoral vehicle to legitimate the Vietnamese occupation in uncontested elections during that decade.<sup>28</sup> The Pol Pot-led Communist Party of Kampuchea regime it replaced, from whose lower and defecting ranks many of the PRK's senior and other officials were drawn, had been responsible for some of the most egregious violence of the twentieth century and had purposely set out to clean the slate of the *ancien régime*.

The PRK was thus made up of officials who had neither a pre-existing socially legitimate basis for power nor an embedding in ongoing political structures, the Pol Pot regime having collapsed when the Vietnamese invaded.<sup>29</sup> The regime was built from the top down, operating what was essentially a "police state" throughout the decade.<sup>30</sup> This included a large Vietnamese and later Cambodian military deemed necessary to deter the remnants of the old regimes displaced by the Vietnamese and encamped on the border through the 1980s. This would prove to be a poor foundation for building genuine reciprocal relationships with voters, but the military was endowed with strong coercive capacity relative to the broader society, which has remained the regime's most fundamental resource.

After the Vietnamese military left almost entirely in 1989, the PRK's large state apparatus and formidable armed forces were the base out of which the CPP operated to contest democratic elections organized by the UN in 1993.<sup>31</sup> This proved an effective basis for remaining in power against the significant electoral threat of FUNCINPEC, the party of the former King Sihanouk. In this way the CPP was able to defeat the political opposition via "propaganda, politics and violence" in 1993,<sup>32</sup> and again in 1998 following a brutal coup de force.

However, by the mid-2000s, the CPP was apparently changing tack by looking to build electoral legitimacy "to win the 'hearts and minds' of rural voters and to undercut competition from opposition parties." This was seen as "the beginning of the development of mass patronage electoral politics" as the CPP was portrayed as having learned that "coercion, intimidation,

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<sup>28</sup> Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge: Inside The Politics Of Nation Building* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979–1989: The Revolution After Pol Pot* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Cambodia: Chea Sim Death Shows Failings of Khmer Rouge Court," 8 June 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/08/cambodia-chea-sim-death-shows-failings-khmer-rouge-court>.

<sup>31</sup> UNTAC Information/Education Division, "The Takeo Papers," (Phnom Penh, 1993); UNTAC Information/Education Division, "The Prey Veng Papers," (Phnom Penh, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> Heder and Ledgerwood, *Politics*.



and violence did not constitute a foundation for permanent strength.”<sup>33</sup> The CPP won big in the election in 2008 characterized by significantly less political violence than in previous elections, seemingly confirming its winning shift from coercion to mass patronage electoral politics.

However, recent analysis of voting patterns by Hughes has shown that, at the national level, the CPP’s vote share has remained fairly static since the 1993 election, casting serious doubt on the notion that there was a growing post-UNTAC efficacy of CPP mass electoral clientelism.<sup>34</sup> I suggest too little attention was paid to the fact that this was a triumph over the remnants of what had been reduced to a divided and intimidated opposition, even if the opposition’s damaged situation was recognized as having already been a vital fact of political life in the 1998 election. FUNCINPEC never recovered from the CPP coup de force, which had decapitated it militarily and hastened its decline as a political entity.<sup>35</sup> It eventually collapsed in on itself in 2004,<sup>36</sup> competing as two separate parties in 2008.

This left the relatively new Sam Rainsy Party and the much newer Human Rights Party, led by Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha respectively, as the most viable, but still divided, opposition parties. However, Sam Rainsy had been in exile most of the years between 2005 and 2008, while Kem Sokha had been targeted by the government and imprisoned in 2005. Analyses of the CPP’s victory in 2008 also underplayed the extent to which those elections saw the same patterns of “coercion, intimidation and violence” as previous elections, if on a smaller scale, and were carried out in an atmosphere in which earlier violence was still reverberating.<sup>37</sup> Behind gradually decreasing but still evident instances of electoral violence,<sup>38</sup> throughout this period Cambodia’s Freedom House rating remained “Not Free,” scoring 5.5/7 (1 being the best, 7 the worst) for their freedom rating, and 5/7 for civil liberties and 6/7 for political rights, in every year from 2003 to 2019.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, the emerging scholarly consensus on the CPP as a hearts-and-minds-winning juggernaut was overblown. That juggernaut remained anchored in the same repressive state bureaucratic apparatus, including the military, that

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<sup>33</sup> Kheang Un, *Cambodia: Return to Authoritarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 30.

<sup>34</sup> Caroline Hughes, “Understanding the Elections in Cambodia 2013,” *Aglos: Journal of Area-Based Global Studies*, (2015): 1–20.

<sup>35</sup> Brad Adams, “Cambodia: July 1997: Shock and Aftermath,” *Human Rights Watch*, 27 July 2007, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2007/07/27/cambodia-july-1997-shock-and-aftermath>.

<sup>36</sup> Steve Heder, “Hun Sen’s Consolidation: Death or the Beginning of Reform?” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2005): 113–130.

<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Cambodia: Threats and Intimidation Mar Campaign,” 26 July 2008, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/07/26/cambodia-threats-intimidation-mar-campaign>.

<sup>38</sup> Information on electoral violence 1993–2019 available at: <https://www-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/>. Michael Coppedge et al., “V-Dem Cambodia–2020. Dataset v10,” (Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds20>.

<sup>39</sup> Freedom House, “Cambodia,” accessed 22 May 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/cambodia>

had been attempting to consolidate its post-Vietnamese rule since the late 1980s via “the exploitation and marginalization of the poor.”<sup>40</sup>

From the early 1990s, CPP officials tasked with delivering patronage and thus votes were operating—as they do to this day—as part of a top-down system for ordering power, and the regime remained organized around its capacity to coerce voters and exploit Cambodia’s natural resources. Central to this operation are party working groups (PWGs), historically a PRK mechanism for centralized control at the local level.<sup>41</sup> These reflect the relative electoral weaknesses Scott noted of a “party that has created its own network of patron-client linkages from the center” when compared to a party which relies “on preexisting patron-client bonds and merely incorporates them into its organization.”<sup>42</sup>

As Wintrobe notes, such institutions in authoritarian regimes are ill-equipped to effectively convey the true level of support of the leadership, reliant as they are on coercion.<sup>43</sup> In the absence of a credible election in 2008 to gauge support, I would suggest this played no small part in the apparent failure by the CPP leadership to appreciate the depth of antagonism toward them going into the election in 2013. Thus the CPP went into that election with imperfect information, perhaps explaining why Hun Sen took such a laissez-faire approach to campaigning, and allowed Sam Rainsy to return to Cambodia the week before the election in 2013, riding a wave of support that greeted him at the airport and built in the days preceding the election.

It also suggests why the CPP only sought to address land grabbing in late 2012, at a point when it was too little, too late, for hundreds of thousands of Cambodians whose land had been often violently confiscated, and which was a lightning rod for CNRP support. In an interview in 2018, Hun Sen expressed his biggest regret in reference to land grabbing, and acknowledged his inability to get a handle on it: “[W]e caused more land disputes because we could not control the situation with our lower-level officials.”<sup>44</sup> However, as argued in the latter section of this article, the scale of these disputes, and the role of central authorities in Cambodia’s land grab, show they were the result of more than the greed of lower-level officials.

An early argument that the CPP’s electoral system was ineffectual at winning real electoral legitimacy was presented by Hughes in her analysis of the election in 2003. She suggested that clientelistic practices were devoid

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<sup>40</sup> Hughes, *The Political Economy of Cambodia’s Transition, 1991–2001*, 59.

<sup>41</sup> This point was made to the author by Steve Heder.

<sup>42</sup> James C. Scott, “Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia,” *The American Political Science Review* 66, no. 1 (1972): 111.

<sup>43</sup> Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>44</sup> Sun Narin, “Hun Sen’s Biggest Regrets: Land Disputes,” *VOA*, 18 July 2018.

of legitimacy, instead reflecting the massive concentration of particularly coercive power in the hands of the CPP in the state.<sup>45</sup> Heder similarly maintained early on that elections were a “performance” which the electorate was supposed to cheer for in the face of the state’s massive bureaucratic and coercive might, rather than willfully participate in, or regard as a reflection of the genuine will of the people.<sup>46</sup>

This reality was a poor foundation for genuine vote-winning reciprocity but has proven a strong one for the entrenchment of repressive governance by CPP state administrators, including those drawn from the military, who have privileged their own interests over those of the rural population on whose votes they were supposed to increasingly depend for legitimacy.

### **The Hollowness of the CPP as a Competitive Electoral Vehicle**

Coercion lies at the core of Cambodia’s political economy. It has entrenched asymmetries of wealth and power that privilege repression over reform, violence over redistribution, and elite cohesion over fragmentation. To a large extent ordinary Cambodians have been excluded from reaping the economic benefits of CPP rule, and are instead expected to be content with abstract GDP growth rates while witnessing the pervasiveness of corruption in their everyday lives. This was pointed out to me again and again during various interviews with officials and villagers in Cambodia in 2017 and 2018. It was also reflected in internal CPP polling in 2016.<sup>47</sup>

A senior Cambodian election monitor described the “cronyism” of the ruling “cluster,” drawing attention to how the economic inequities created under the CPP’s economic system have been rejected by the electorate, while suggesting that the returning of votes for patronage has been as much about coercion as reciprocity.

You can see the family in the past the parent [the CPP] always give money and the children [the people] obey but this time the parents give money to the children, but the children not obey as before ... . They argue with the parents, so the parents now try to understand what happened, why they not able to control their children. Some [argue] they lack discipline, [it’s a] weakness of education, that why the children not follow the parent. But I don’t think so. The reason... [is] the economic activity... [It] reflects the way the patronage systems of the party [to] give money is not effective.<sup>48</sup>

A former senior advisor to the Royal Government of Cambodia put it

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<sup>45</sup> Caroline Hughes, “The Politics of Gifts: Tradition and Regimentation in Contemporary Cambodia,” *The Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37, no. 3 (2006): 469–489

<sup>46</sup> Steve Heder, “Political Theatre,” 51–172.

<sup>47</sup> SHAVIV, “Public Opinion Research Cambodia,” (2016).

<sup>48</sup> Interview with senior election monitor, Phnom Penh, 16 May 2017.

more bluntly, reflecting the politically counterproductive nature of a patronage system that gives a little with one hand, but takes enormously with the other: “When people need something, they [the CPP] set up a lot of mechanism for the nation ... it’s like humanitarianism inside your own country. But it’s not going to work ... The people are not stupid!” This, he continued, was not least because elite benefits were being doled out in such a way as to seriously undermine the mass patronage system: “[Y]ou can still have villas, luxury cars, children in private school and so on, it’s OK, as long as the majority of the people, you don’t grab their land [without] allowing them to have a minimum of things.”<sup>49</sup>

This has intersected with and contributed to the CPP’s inability to get a handle on new, young voters who entered the electoral market for the first time in 2013. Many were instead captured by the CNRP. Approximately 1.5 million young Cambodians voted for the first time in 2013, and were turned off by a CPP platform defined in terms of its claim of having saved Cambodia.<sup>50</sup> Opposition leader Sam Rainsy offered me the following plausible explanation:

There are more and more young people who are more informed, more organised, more critical, more demanding ... . People are more educated ... . Even though people remain very poor, when they come to the cities they are not starving anymore. They do any job to survive but the fact that they are even slightly better off; they are less subject to vote buying.<sup>51</sup>

The CNRP’s positive platform was amplified by new means of communication. In 2016, 48 percent of Cambodians claimed to have access to the Internet or Facebook, and more people accessed information online (30 percent) than TV (29 percent) or radio (15 percent).<sup>52</sup> According to the 2016 polling data, 54 percent of voters who got their information from Facebook said they would vote for the CNRP in the election in 2018, as compared to 20 percent of Facebook informed voters who said they would choose the CPP.

Widespread dissatisfaction at state predation over land and resources, harm to the environment, and official corruption was reflected in CPP polling post-2013 and relayed to me in interviews I conducted with villagers around the time of the national election in 2018. As one person put it, reflecting on the inequalities of CPP patronage, “[d]uring ... development we suffer difficulties ... . The poor get poorer and the rich get richer. So, most of our

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with former government advisor, Phnom Penh, 19 September 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Sebastian Strangio, *Hun Sen’s Cambodia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 258–288.

<sup>51</sup> Sam Rainsy, interview by author, via Skype, 15 August 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Kimchhoy Phong, Lihol Srou, and Javier Solá, “Mobile Phones and Internet Use in Cambodia 2016,” The Asia Foundation (2016).

people live in poverty, especially farmers in the countryside.”<sup>53</sup> Another interviewee explained that there is very little possibility to complain, and that complaints are ignored by officials who act only in their own interest.<sup>54</sup> In such views, party officials are not seen to reciprocate for the demands they placed on villagers. Thus, the demands lack contingency central to clientelist politics. Villagers complained that the CPP seeks contributions from families when they need money, but the family cannot expect help in return if there is a problem and may actually be discriminated against if they are thought to support the opposition. Another person interviewed likened the local situation to increased repression at the national level, and claimed that they risked losing their job if they complained, and would “get into trouble” if they raised criticisms, facing risks “like Kem Ley,”<sup>55</sup> the murdered analyst and government critic who was gunned down in Phnom Penh in 2016.

However, perhaps the strongest evidence of the extent to which the CPP mass patronage system was fundamentally weak as an electoral strategy at the local level was made clear during the 2017 commune election, when the CNRP built on its vote share from the 2013 national election to make serious inroads into rural areas the CPP had dominated for decades.<sup>56</sup>

The apparently genuine choice the CNRP represented galvanized this dissatisfaction into a public challenge via the ballot box, and in such a way as to bring the distinction between the CPP’s patron-client systems more sharply into focus. The mass patronage electoral system was far less reciprocal, and far less contingent on benefits for votes, than has previously been assumed. In contrast, the intra-elite system held and continued to be able to employ coercive practices proving sufficient to the task of dealing with the threat of an effective opposition by doing away with it, often violently. That this was the case is not surprising if we turn to consider the real beneficiaries of the CPP’s patronage: the party itself and its security apparatus.

### **The CPP’s Predatory Patronage: A Military-Eye View from the Land**

A deadly three-day assault launched against anti-government protesters in Phnom Penh in January 2014 signalled that political violence remained a critical part of the CPP’s electoral repertoire, a decade after it was supposed to have faded from view. The assault was carried out by a mixed force of RCAF units, including specialist paramilitary forces, gendarmes, and

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<sup>53</sup> Interviews with villagers in 3 sites, North-eastern Cambodia, 2018. Exact date withheld for confidentiality.

<sup>54</sup> Interviews with villagers in 3 sites, North-eastern Cambodia, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with university student in Northeast Cambodia, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> In 2017, the CPP won 50.76 percent of votes compared to the CNRP’s 43.83 percent. This was a significant shift from 2012, when the CPP won 61.8 percent of the vote, while the SRP and HRP won 30.7 percent combined. National Election Committee. 2017, <https://www.neclect.org.kh/khmer/content/2399>.

intervention units, taking orders from a mixed command of local and national CPP officials in government.<sup>57</sup>

Cambodia's security forces have been politicized since they were re-established by the Vietnamese in the 1980s. This is documented in an internal CPP history released in 2015.<sup>58</sup> They remain politicized today. In 2013 and 2018, the then-topmost RCAF generals Pol Sarouen, Kun Kim, and Meas Sophea coordinated the election machines and centre-level work teams in Preah Sihanouk, Oddar Meanchey, and Preah Vihear Provinces respectively, openly reflecting the military role at the top of the party. In each case these men were tasked with heading the CPP election apparatus, running at the head of the party ticket for seats in the National Assembly, and then standing down and ceding the seats to a civilian.<sup>59</sup>

The symbiosis of the CPP and the military in 2017 was explained to me by a senior brigadier general: "The military tend to see themselves as the backbone of society. The one who maintain order . . . . [Military people] still identify themselves as within the party. [They] see no contradiction. Officially you don't talk about the party as the same thing as the country. But unofficially, it's still there."<sup>60</sup>

This has an economic dimension that is central to understanding why the armed forces have proved capable and willing to suppress anti-regime dissent whenever deemed necessary.<sup>61</sup> Deputy Commander of the RCAF and Commander of the Gendarmerie Royale Khmer (GRK) Sao Sokha made this point to me in 2017: his forces "must maintain stability and order in order to make possible investment and economic wellbeing for the country."<sup>62</sup> Eva Bellin has argued that militaries which operate along lines of patronage have a strong material interest in maintaining stability against popular pressures and when reform may be ruinous.<sup>63</sup> In Cambodia the RCAF works alongside the state bureaucracy to continue to exploit and marginalize the poor, widening the gap between the recipients of elite and mass patronage, much to the benefit of the former against the interests of the latter.

Land disputes in Cambodia are a critical site in which this CPP-state-military cooperation may be understood. It is a realm in which there is

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<sup>57</sup> The Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), *The Right to Remain Silent: Expressive Rights in the Kingdom of Cambodia*, (Phnom Penh: 2014).

<sup>58</sup> The Cambodian People's Party, "pravoat ney kar ta-sou neung aphivoat meatophoum kampuchea neung tumneak-tumnorng kampuchea-vietnam pi chhnam 1989 dal chhnam 2013", [History of the Struggle and Development of the Cambodian Motherland and Cambodia-Vietnam Relations from 1989 to 2013], (Phnom Penh: 2015).

<sup>59</sup> Author's list of CPP Central Committee Centre-level work teams from 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with RCAF Brigadier General, Phnom Penh, 27 February 2017.

<sup>61</sup> Neil Loughlin, "Authoritarian Regime Durability: An Analysis of Cambodia's Coercion-Dominant Winning Coalition" (PhD Dissertation, SOAS, 2019), 1-360.

<sup>62</sup> General Sao Sokha, interview by author, Phnom Penh, 17 February 2017

<sup>63</sup> Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004): 139-157.

reciprocity, contingency, and iteration between patron and client. As one senior NGO worker put it: “Land is just the distribution of wealth from pillaging Cambodia’s natural resources. Cambodia is seen by the elite as a big pie for them to eat. Each has a role. The security forces do the security. The tycoons do the selling. The party does the rule of law and the paperwork.”<sup>64</sup>

Cambodia’s land-grabbing frenzy went into overdrive in 2004, once the opposition had collapsed as an electoral force, precisely during the same period the CPP was supposed to be securing its hold on power via mass electoral clientelism. The rights group LICADHO reported an enormous increase in the number of land dispossession cases it was monitoring from 2003, with 25 in 2003 to 112 in 2004 and 126 in 2005.<sup>65</sup> Large swathes of land were made commercially available to local tycoons, and international investors often operating with local partners.<sup>66</sup>

Particularly significant in the period when the CPP was supposedly cementing its legitimacy via mass patronage were exclusionary economic land concessions (ELCs). These are long-term leases of state land that allowed beneficiaries to clear land in order to develop industrial agriculture. According to one estimate they affected up to 700,000 Cambodians between 2003 and 2013.<sup>67</sup> Official data on these concessions is incomplete. However, numbers compiled by the UN’s special rapporteur on human rights noted a steady increase between 2004 and 2012, with a total of 320 ELCs in 21 provinces granted to foreign and local companies by 2012.<sup>68</sup> It is estimated that by the time of the election that year an area equivalent of up to 50 percent of Cambodia’s arable land had been allocated to ELCs, with as much as 30 percent of that land owned by 1 percent of its population.<sup>69</sup>

On paper, a number of avenues exist to settle land disputes in Cambodia. However, as observed by rights group ADHOC, “formal conflict resolution processes and institutions are often put aside or do not play their role.”<sup>70</sup> In 2012 less than 30 percent of complaints filed to the government’s own National Authority for Land Dispute Resolution (NALDR) were resolved.<sup>71</sup> Even when communities could claim to have farmed land for decades, this

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with senior human rights monitor 1, Phnom Penh, 20 January 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Cambodian League for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (LICADHO), “Human Rights in Cambodia: The Façade of Stability,” 3 May 2006, 3.

<sup>66</sup> ADHOC, “Cambodia: A Turning Point? Land, Housing and Natural Resource Rights in Cambodia in 2012,” (Phnom Penh: 2013).

<sup>67</sup> ADHOC, “Land Situation in Cambodia in 2013,” (Phnom Penh: 2014).

<sup>68</sup> Surya P. Subedi, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Cambodia,” 24 September 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Andreas Neef, Siphath Touch and Jamaree Chiengthong “The Politics and Ethics of Land Concessions in Rural Cambodia,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 26 no. 6: 1085–1103

<sup>70</sup> ADHOC, “Cambodia: A Turning Point?,” 2.

<sup>71</sup> May Titthara, “Most Land Disputes in Cambodia Unsettled,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, 21 February 2013.

was difficult to prove and even harder to uphold through the courts. Rulings regularly went in favour of the wealthiest and most politically connected parties to the dispute: tycoons supported by local- and national-level CPP officials, while communities claiming the land saw it cleared and then policed by security forces to prevent them from returning.<sup>72</sup>

The security forces are the ultimate guarantee of the CPP's survival and are the backers of its predatory behaviour, as both beneficiaries and enforcers on behalf of other beneficiaries. Large-scale land concessions have meant the CPP has been able to maintain a large coercive apparatus dependent on its patronage, despite calls for demobilization,<sup>73</sup> as elements in the CPP and tycoons plundered the state with their help. In 2002, RCAF soldiers could expect to earn around USD\$20 and be granted 20 kilos of rice a month. Unable to live on that amount, soldiers supplemented their incomes with second jobs, "sub-contracted out" by their commanders.<sup>74</sup> A 2000 government defence white paper spoke of "allowing soldiers to cooperate with investment units in the agro-industrial field."<sup>75</sup> This model has been reaffirmed in subsequent defence reviews and its ongoing relevance confirmed to me by a veteran observer of the RCAF.<sup>76</sup>

According to World Bank figures, military expenditure reached around USD\$370 million in 2016.<sup>77</sup> At the same time military numbers have stabilized at around 192,000 since 2002.<sup>78</sup> A simple calculation demonstrates the official budget would just cover a basic salary of around USD\$160 a month per soldier, not dependent on rank, with nothing left over for purchasing or the maintenance of equipment, military bases, or other items necessary for upkeep of a functional army.<sup>79</sup> The official figures thus reveal the extent to which off-budget financing and sponsorship deals remain vital to military coffers.

The military's involvement in land grabs represents the sharp end of

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<sup>72</sup> ADHOC, "Cambodia: A Turning Point?"

<sup>73</sup> Dylan Hendrickson, "Cambodia's Security-Sector Reforms: Limits of a Downsizing Strategy." *Conflict, Security and Development* 1, no. 1 (2000): 67–82.

<sup>74</sup> David Mead, "Contribution to National Conference on Cambodia's Demobilization and Reintegration," (paper presented at the National Conference on Cambodia's Demobilization and Reintegration, Phnom Penh, 10–11 June 2002): 1.

<sup>75</sup> Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of National Defence and International Cooperation, "Defending the Kingdom of Cambodia," (Phnom Penh: 2000). See also: Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of National Defence and International Cooperation, "Cambodia's Defense Strategic Review 2013," (Phnom Penh: 2013).

<sup>76</sup> General David Mead, interview by author, Phnom Penh, 25 January 2017.

<sup>77</sup> World Bank, "Military Expenditure (% of GDP) – Cambodia," accessed 22 May 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=KH>

<sup>78</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "Military Expenditure by Country, in Constant (2015) US\$ m., 1988–1996," accessed 22 May 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932019%20in%20constant%20%282018%29%20USD.pdf>.

<sup>79</sup> World Bank, "Military Expenditure."



businesses that provide great benefit to high-ranking military commanders who operate in collusion with tycoons protected by the CPP state, but who also are thereby able to act as patrons to their armed soldier clients. Since 2010, military and business links previously only discernible through violent evictions have been joined by direct sponsorship deals, symbolized by the signing of the Decision on Restructuring between Army Units, National Police and Civil Bodies in February 2010.<sup>80</sup> This was initially heralded as a measure to reinforce border defences in connection with briefly violent territorial disputes with Thailand and to provide welfare to units. However, for ordinary people, this relationship was described to me in an interview with a senior human rights monitor as “very, very dangerous” because of the potential for “severe conflicts of interest.”<sup>81</sup> This has been manifest in practice as military units directly sponsored by tycoons have participated in land dispossessions on their concessions.

Another senior human rights monitor working on the land rights cases noted the continued mutual benefits involved in such practices and their negative impact on state coffers and resource management:

The connection between military and business is most clear at the border. For example, in Preah Vihear during the war. The military made alliances with business, who provided them food, supplies and other things. In return for the alliance the businessman is untouchable. [The businessman] does not even need to pay taxes as they give money to the state ... to the military! The businessmen get a great deal. The tycoons send cheap food. But get back that and more from timber, mining etc.<sup>82</sup>

Since 2010, cooperation has grown to more than a hundred sponsorship deals, according to Hun Manet, the son of the prime minister.<sup>83</sup> At a ceremony in 2015 Tea Banh lauded ten years of such cooperation, declaring it represented “a culture of sharing and contributing to our nation, between civil institutions and RCAF.”<sup>84</sup> The deals read like a who’s who of CPP-dependent tycoons with track records of involvement in land disputes and linked to illegal logging activity in Cambodia.

It presents a possibility to keep soldiers close economically to their commanders who, working in tandem with civilian tycoons, continue to provide them with resources and jobs on the land as both farmers and as useful enforcers should situations arise deemed to require violence against

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<sup>80</sup> Royal Government of Cambodia, “Decision on Restructuring between Army Units, National Police and Civil Bodies” (Phnom Penh: 2010); Cambodia New Vision, “Inaugurating Achievements at the Military Region 5,” February 2010.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with senior human rights monitor 2, Phnom Penh, 16 February 2017.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with senior human rights monitor 3, Phnom Penh, 2 February 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Sekheng Vong and Daniel Pye, “In Praise of RCAF Inc.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, 30 July 2015, <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/praise-rcaf-inc>.

<sup>84</sup> Sekheng Vong and Daniel Pye, “In Praise of RCAF Inc.”

those supposedly threatening Cambodia's "stability." As a senior human rights monitor commented on the current situation, "it's collusion between military, political and economic power where people are vying for privilege, all equipped with all three components."<sup>85</sup> Land and other resource grabs have turned security force commanders into businessmen in their own right and their soldiers into workforces for hire. This has allowed for a mutually beneficial economic relationship within the CPP state between military operators and other businesspersons against much of the electorate, and thus created shared economic incentives to use soldiers for violent repression against anti-regime mobilization.<sup>86</sup> A foreign military analyst who discussed the RCAF with me concluded:

The military guys are big economic players on the level of Oknhas.<sup>87</sup> They're involved in everything. These RCAF guys aren't getting their money from their salaries, which is low even for ranking officers. Money comes from the business deals. And the tycoons benefit as a link to somebody in the RCAF. It gives you an advantage over your business competitors ... . In the 1990s the game was to win the war. Now the game isn't military, it's the economic game.<sup>88</sup>

Among the most notorious of sponsors is CPP senator and tycoon Ly Yong Phat, whose land grabs in his original provincial base of Koh Kong illustrated a foundational parallelism of the CPP's patronage systems indicative of other party-military-business relationships, through which elites have been rewarded enormously at the expense of rural communities.

Ly Yong Phat, known as "the King of Koh Kong," got his start in cross-border trading from the 1980s.<sup>89</sup> At this time Cambodia provided an important land bridge to bring goods to Vietnam from Thailand. Business along this border was linked to smuggling activities, which continued through UNTAC times into the present. In the 1990s and early 2000s Ly Yong Phat invested his capital in a number of hotels, including the upmarket Phnom Penh Hotel, which opened in 2003. He became a crucial player in Cambodia's land sector in the mid-2000s, as Cambodia's ELC-granting process went through the roof. The payoff in terms of land acquisition has been enormous. According to a 2012 report released by Cambodian rights group LICADHO and *The Cambodia Daily*, Ly Yong Phat held an interest in 10 sugar and rubber plantations and in a "special economic zone," spanning 86,000 hectares and

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<sup>85</sup> Interview with senior human rights monitor 2, Phnom Penh, 16 February, 2017.

<sup>86</sup> Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004): 139–157.

<sup>87</sup> Loosely translated as "baron."

<sup>88</sup> Interview with embassy military analyst, Phnom Penh, 10 February 2017.

<sup>89</sup> US Embassy Phnom Penh, "Cambodia's Top 10 Tycoons," 09 August 2007. [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07PHNOMPENH1034\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07PHNOMPENH1034_a.html)

making up roughly 4.3 percent of land concessions nationwide.<sup>90</sup> Although notorious for sugar, he is a leading player across Cambodia's agricultural sector. His Chub rubber concession in Kampong Cham is Cambodia's largest at 17,720 hectares, accounting for approximately 10 percent of the country's rubber output, churning out around 40 tonnes a day.

Ly Yong Phat has sponsored military units and government ministries that are linked to his business activities. One example involves the state *Electricité du Cambodge* (EdC), which is linked to Ly Yong Phat's casino along the border with Thailand in Military Region 4, where he sponsors Infantry Brigade 42.<sup>91</sup> Cambodia's state electricity giant has a contract to buy electricity from Ly Yong Phat's Cambodia Electricity Private (CEP) for 18 years.<sup>92</sup> According to the military analyst, in Military Region 4, "there are hundreds of military resettlement houses all in a row. Sponsored by EdC [and] linked to 42 Brigade ... . These houses cost \$4000 a pop."<sup>93</sup> His Phnom Penh Sugar Company, operating in Kampong Speu Province, is linked to Battalion 313 based in the South-western Military Region 3, which encompasses Koh Kong and Ly Yong Phat's sugar concessions there.<sup>94</sup> The unit is made up of former Khmer Rouge integrated into the RCAF in the late 1990s, with a long history of involvement in illegal logging and other business activities.<sup>95</sup>

The political utility and popular disutility of such state, military, and tycoon connections is evident in the use of violence by the armed units Ly Yong Phat sponsors in the service of his economic interests. In October 2009, a contingent of approximately 150 police, military police, and hired demolition workers burned and razed the houses of around 118 families. RCAF troops from Brigade 42 set up roadblocks and aided in the burning and bulldozing of the village. The villagers were never allowed to return to their homes.<sup>96</sup>

Ly Yong Phat's concessions also provide an example of the ways in which triumphant and deeply interwoven CPP state-military and tycoon elites have succeeded in utilizing their grip on power to expropriate private goods from the poor and concentrate wealth in their own hands. By the time of the election in 2013, ELCs made up an area of 2.6 million hectares, equalling more than 10 percent of the entire country.<sup>97</sup> This is over three times the

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<sup>90</sup> Paul Vreize and Kuch Naren, "Carving Up Cambodia: One Concession at a Time," *The Cambodia Daily*, 10–11 March 2012.

<sup>91</sup> Royal Government of Cambodia, "Decision on Restructuring between Army Units, National Police and Civil Bodies" (2010); Cambodia New Vision, "Inaugurating Achievements at the Military Region 5," February 2010.

<sup>92</sup> Shaun Turton and Seangly Pak, "Inside the Hun Family's Business Empire," *The Phnom Penh Post*, 07 July 2016; Global Witness, "Taking a Cut," (London: 2004).

<sup>93</sup> Interview with embassy military analyst, Phnom Penh, 10 February 2017.

<sup>94</sup> Royal Government of Cambodia, "Decision on Restructuring between Army Units, National Police and Civil Bodies" (2010).

<sup>95</sup> Global Witness, "Taking a Cut."

<sup>96</sup> Clean Sugar Campaign, "Blood Sugar," accessed 22 May 2020, <http://www.boycottbloodsugar.net/>

<sup>97</sup> Forest Trends, "Conversion Timber, Forest Monitoring, and Land-Use Governance in Cambodia," (2015): i.

area of land allocated as agricultural concessions by 2003. Just five CPP senators own 20 percent of all this land. Like Ly Yong Phat, these civilians made their fortunes in the 1990s in crony capitalist deals with the CPP.<sup>98</sup>

On the other hand, smallholders on land taken for concessions have become day labourers on the land they once farmed as their own. Ly Yong Phat's notoriety made him an emblematic target for the CNRP rallying cries: "Ly Yong Phat! I tell you that you cannot live in happiness for the rest of your life. Ly Yong Phat, you have mistreated people in Koh Kong province. Ly Yong Phat, be careful!"<sup>99</sup>

It is little surprise therefore that land was still one of the key sites of contention in the 2013 election. Across the country CPP land grabs had represented the "bad news" of central government policies and practices contrary to local needs.<sup>100</sup> This bad news of land grabs, more easily disseminated via social media and other channels than ever before, had become widespread and often directly felt by villagers. Rights groups had sensitized communities of their rights with regard to land disputes, while national and eventually international media publicity of abuses encouraged them to assert these rights. The overall effect was the CPP had undermined its legitimacy to such an extent as to significantly negate attempts to build it at the grassroots.

Perhaps cognizant of the deep unpopularity of ELCs and with much of Cambodia's exploitable land already privatized to the benefit of the regime, Hun Sen announced a moratorium on the granting of ELCs in May 2012, coupled with a student-led land-titling scheme for rural farmers, the year before the 2013 election. However, the moratorium was deeply flawed and was enacted in such a way as to reinforce repression as central to CPP rule.<sup>101</sup> It highlighted the extent to which the CPP's most fundamental patronage system was that which benefitted its elite supporters, and the pre-eminent need to keep feeding the security forces at the core of the regime. This had kept it in power since 1993 in the face of previous crises and would prove to do so again in the post-2013 crackdown.

In the days and weeks following the 2013 election results, the CNRP was able to muster large numbers of protesters, especially in Phnom Penh, to take to the streets. If the result of the 2013 election should not have been so unexpected to the CPP and various observers, given the weakness of their electoral clientelism, the subsequent violent crackdown and repression of the opposition was perfectly in keeping with their record of using state

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<sup>98</sup> Global Witness, "Cambodia's Family Trees," (London: 2007), 2.

<sup>99</sup> Sokchea Meas, "Rainy 'Attack' Shocks Tycoon," *The Phnom Penh Post*, 18 May 2014.

<sup>100</sup> Caroline Hughes, "Understanding the Elections," 8; Astrid Norén-Nilsson, "Cambodia at a Crossroads: The Narratives of Cambodia National Rescue Party Supporters after the 2013 Elections," *Internationales Asienforum*, no. 46 (3-4) (2015): 261-278.

<sup>101</sup> Neil Loughlin and Sarah Milne, "'After the grab?': Land control and regime survival in Cambodia, post-2012," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, (2020). DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2020.1740295

violence in the service of their interests. The repressive apparatus had benefitted enormously from the conditions that spurred the electoral and street challenges to the regime. The violent crackdowns in the streets and squares of Phnom Penh in early 2014 paved the way for further repression that followed, enacted by elements within the CPP state that had, like the military, enjoyed the spoils of corruption of which land grabbing is emblematic.<sup>102</sup> The upshot was the remodelling of Cambodia's electoral landscape by dissolving the CNRP and holding elections with no competitors able to challenge the CPP in 2018, following the exile of Sam Rainsy, the arrest of Kem Sokha, and the dissolution of the CNRP by the CPP-controlled courts.

## **Conclusion**

This paper re-evaluated previous analyses of Cambodian politics that sought to explain the CPP regime's longevity in terms of mass patronage and performance legitimacy to secure electoral hegemony. It demonstrated that the CPP lacked the societal embedding necessary to build a successful mass party to maintain power under competitive authoritarianism over the long term, while coercion has remained its constant and underlying foundation for survival. It explained the symbiosis of the CPP with the coercive apparatus of the state in historical and institutional terms, and provided evidence to show how state, military, and economic elites have benefitted from patronage at the direct expense of large swathes of the electorate, with land grabs emblematic of the "bad news" of government policy. In the face of a resurgent opposition in 2013, the regime's survival was guaranteed via repression enacted by a security apparatus deeply embedded in its extractive political economy. The security forces have been among the main beneficiaries of the land boom, working together with capitalist entrepreneurs whose business interests developed under the protection of the CPP.

Instead of addressing that malcontent, the regime has focused its collective might on repressing it. Their actions since have demonstrated the difficulties in a system of elite and mass patronage that created an enormously unbalanced arrangement for political survival and reflected the tensions in simultaneously managing vertical and horizontal threats to its power. The election in 2013 and political crisis that followed revealed the hollowness in the reciprocity between the CPP as patron and rural Cambodians as election-time clients. This relationship was not iterative, but compelled, and was exposed as such when a genuine challenger appeared behind whom voters could throw their support, in the hopes of better benefits in the future.

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<sup>102</sup> Of the 344 demonstrations in Phnom Penh in 2013, 129 were subject to crackdowns by the authorities, leaving two people dead and many more injured. ADHOC, *The Right to Remain Silenced*, 19–20.

As previous scholarship has proven, building a highly institutionalized, mass-based party is difficult, and can be achieved only under certain historic and other conditions. These conditions were absent in Cambodia from the start. Herein lies the explanation for an open return to coercive form. The regime was born out of repression, which was embedded over time within the institutional structures of the state. As a result, coercion remains fundamental and operates against the interests of much of the voting public. This suggests that the CPP's attempts to win hearts and minds only appeared to work when there was no credible opposition, as happened temporarily in 2008 as a culmination of previous violence. Seen this way, there was no "return to coercion." It never really went away and remains the key to keeping opposition at bay.

*Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, Leiden, Netherlands, March 2020*